Saint Augustine's Eschatology and Holy War Doctrine

Saint Augustine's eschatological framework fundamentally shaped his justification for holy wars by reframing earthly conflict as spiritual warfare within a cosmic drama between the City of God and the City of Man. His amillennial theology positioned the Church as Christ's spiritual kingdom on earth, making its defense and expansion matters of eternal significance rather than merely temporal politics.

The Eschatological Foundation: Amillennialism and the Two Cities

Augustine's mature eschatology rejected premillennialism—the belief in a literal thousand-year earthly reign of Christ—in favor of amillennialism, which viewed Christ's kingdom as spiritually present through the triumphant Church. This theological shift proved monumental for Christian political thought. In his major work *De Civitate Dei* (413-427), Augustine developed a comprehensive eschatology that divided humanity into two distinct cities: the City of God, comprising the elect who live by faith and charity, and the City of Man, consisting of those trapped in self-centered sinfulness.[1] [2]

This dualistic worldview interpreted all of human history as an eschatological drama unfolding toward the final judgment. Augustine conceived time linearly, directed by Christ toward a fixed eternal goal where the two cities would be finally separated. The present age represented a period of ambiguity where the ultimate destiny of individuals remained uncertain, but the cosmic battle lines were clearly drawn. This framework transformed earthly conflicts into manifestations of the spiritual war between these two cities, making the defense of the Church a matter of eschatological urgency.[2] [3]

From Eschatology to Holy War: The Punitive Justice Framework

Augustine's eschatological convictions directly informed his revolutionary approach to just war theory. Moving beyond defensive warfare, he developed a **punitive concept** of *jus ad bellum* (right to war) that treated military action as a form of divine correction. War became just when fought to punish sinners and restore moral order, transforming it from a necessary evil into a positive religious duty.[4]

Divine Authorization and the Soldier as Instrument

Central to Augustine's holy war doctrine was the principle of divine authorization. Drawing from Old Testament precedents where God commanded Israel's wars, Augustine argued that soldiers became instruments of divine justice rather than autonomous moral agents. He explicitly stated that "those who, by God's authority, have waged wars ... have punished the wicked with death

according to his laws ... have in no way acted against that commandment which says, 'Thou shalt not kill'". This reasoning absolved Christian soldiers of guilt while placing full moral responsibility on the legitimate authority—whether king or God himself.[5] [4]

The eschatological dimension became clear in Augustine's assertion that "the enemies of the Church are to be coerced even by war". Since the Church represented Christ's spiritual kingdom on earth, attacks against it were not merely political but cosmic offenses requiring divine retribution. The soldier functioned as "a sword which is the instrument of its user," enacting God's eschatological judgment in history.[4]

Intention and Inner Disposition

Augustine maintained that intention—not outward action—determined a war's righteousness. He required an "inward disposition" of peace and love (*caritas*) even in violent action. This seemingly paradoxical requirement reflected his eschatological vision: the ultimate goal was not conquest but the restoration of harmony between humanity and God. War served as a temporary measure to curb the "licentious passions" of the wicked and prepare for the eternal peace of the "perpetual Sabbath" that the City of God would enjoy after final judgment.[6] [2] [4]

The Amillennial Imperative for Holy War

Augustine's amillennial eschatology created a unique theological imperative for holy warfare. Unlike premillennialists who awaited Christ's physical return to establish His kingdom, amillennialists believed Christ already reigned spiritually through the Church. This theological stance meant that:[1]

1. **The Church bore responsibility** for establishing and defending God's kingdom on earth during the present age
2. **Earthly enemies** of the Church were simultaneously enemies of Christ's spiritual reign
3. **Temporal success** in converting or subduing opponents had eternal consequences for souls

The eschatological urgency intensified because Augustine viewed most of humanity as part of the *massa damnata*—a "lump" deserving eternal damnation due to original sin. Within this framework, holy war could function as a divinely ordained instrument to rescue some from the City of Man before the final separation at judgment. The conflict was not merely territorial but salvific.[2]

Historical Context and Development

Augustine developed these doctrines during the tumultuous decline of the Roman Empire, particularly after the 410 CE sack of Rome, when pagan critics blamed Christianity's pacifist tendencies for weakening imperial defenses. His eschatological politics responded to this crisis by providing theological justification for Christian military service while maintaining that war remained a cause for lament.[4]

His synthesis drew from multiple sources: Roman *ius fetiales* (rituals ensuring divine approval for war), Ciceronian concepts of natural law, and earlier Christian thought. However, Augustine uniquely combined these with his eschatological framework, creating a doctrine where "war

commanded by God" became inherently just because it advanced the separation between the two cities.[5]

Limitations and Later Development

While Augustine's eschatology provided the theological foundation for holy war, his theory of *jus in bello* (law in war) remained underdeveloped, focusing primarily on legitimate authority and intention rather than detailed conduct regulations. Later theologians, particularly Thomas Aquinas, would systematize these principles into the classic three criteria: legitimate authority, just cause, and right intention.[7] [5]

Augustine's influence proved enduring because his eschatological vision transformed how Christians understood their role in history. No longer passive observers awaiting Christ's return, believers became active participants in the cosmic drama between the two cities, authorized to use force in service of the eschatological separation that would culminate in final judgment. This framework would later justify Crusades and other religious wars by framing them as divinely ordained actions within salvation history rather than merely political conflicts.[8] [2]

⁂

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustine_of_Hippo
2. https://afkimel.wordpress.com/2022/11/29/st-augustine-on-the-last-things-and-human-destiny-is-eschatological-universal-possible/
3. http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222012000100034
4. https://web.sas.upenn.edu/discentes/2024/10/13/practical-just-war-st-augustine-his-framing-of-just-war-theory/
5. https://artsanddivinityfacultyjournal.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/files/2023/02/St-Augustine-Just-War-Correct-1.pdf
6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just_war_theory
7. https://www.facebook.com/john.dickson.9406417/posts/the-man-who-gave-us-the-concept-of-just-war-st-augustine-ad-400-insisted-that-ev/10165471397154447/
8. https://schoolofmary.org/2024/07/22/the-city-of-god-understanding-time-and-history/
9. https://voegelinview.com/eschatological-politics-the-chosen-people-of-god-and-their-holy-wars/
10. https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3040.htm
11. https://www.britannica.com/topic/eschatology/The-views-of-Augustine
12. https://wp.cune.edu/matthewphillips/2017/02/08/augustine-on-just-war/
13. https://www.knowyouresaved.com/post/catholic-origins-of-calvinism-and-islam-augustine-s-writings-on-holy-war
14. https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20131011_2.htm
15. https://www.athensjournals.gr/history/2020-6-1-1-Starostin.pdf
16. https://www.reimaginefaith.org/post/augustine-2020-the-last-judgment
17. https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2024/02/augustine-of-hippo-a-life/
18. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/augustine/
19. https://holyredeemervan.org/pastor-columns/justwardoctrine

20. https://www.affinity.org.uk/foundations/issue-65/issue-65-article-4-augustine-on-revelation-20-a-root-of-amillennialism/